

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

PRESS CONFERENCE

OF

HONORABLE ROBERT S. McNAMARA
SECRETARY OF DEFENSE

THE PENTAGON

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2:30 p.m.

SECRETARY McNAMARA: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen.

I have one announcement, after which I will attempt to answer whatever questions you wish to direct to me.

Four Soviet long-range reconnaissance aircraft overflew the United States aircraft carrier FORRESTAL on the 22nd of February in the North Atlantic southeast of the Azores Islands. The Soviet aircraft, which were the TU-95, known as the Bear model, apparently flew from a base in Russia in flights of two aircraft each. The flights were separated by approximately two hours. Both flights were observed and followed by United States Air Force aircraft east of Iceland enroute to and from the FORRESTAL's location. The first two Soviet aircraft flew over the FORRESTAL at approximately 9:00 o'clock in the morning. One of the Bears remained high, at about 30,000 feet; the other flew low, at about 2,000 feet below the overcast and passed over the FORRESTAL twice.

Aircraft were launched from the FORRESTAL. They maintained visual contact with the Soviet aircraft for some 150 miles as they withdrew to the north. The same high-low procedure was followed by the second flight which flew over the FORRESTAL about 11:00 o'clock the same morning. This formation was also intercepted by the United States Air Force aircraft and escorted by FORRESTAL aircraft while in the area of the carrier. None of the Soviet aircraft showed hostile intent.

Now I will be happy to answer your questions.

QUESTION: What was the date, sir?

SECRETARY McNAMARA: The 22nd of February.

QUESTION: What significance do you attach to the overflight by the Soviet bombers?

overflights of other carriers took place as far back as late January, if my notes are correct.

SECRETARY McNAMARA: That is true. Initially it appeared to be an isolated incident. As I mentioned earlier, we have had many, many incidents in the past when Soviet medium- and shorter-range reconnaissance aircraft have overflown our naval vessels on various oceans of the world, particularly the Pacific and the North Atlantic.

The first time the longer range aircraft were used it appeared to be simply an isolated case, but having seen three or four incidents of this kind in the last four weeks or five weeks, it seems to us to begin to form a pattern and a rather substantial addition to their previous reconnaissance activity and we simply wanted to report it to you.

QUESTION: Would you give a rough number, a round number, on how many overflights there were, say, in 1962?

SECRETARY McNAMARA: I am sorry. I can't. It is not that I don't wish to. I simply don't have the figure but it was a fairly substantial number because in areas where we are a few hundred miles off shore there are rather frequent overflights. I would say scores.

QUESTION: Did the Soviet planes attempt any evasive action?

SECRETARY McNAMARA: Not to my knowledge, no.

QUESTION: Just to change the subject a trifle, we were told that there were several Russian ships headed for Cuba and if we go by the information that we have gotten from any agency of government, they have never gotten there. I would like to know, have they arrived; have any of the Russian troops been loaded aboard; and have any of the ships started back toward Russia with any troops aboard?

SECRETARY McNAMARA: The question is were Soviet ships or, the question didn't mention passenger ships, I presume you were referring basically to passenger type ships, were Soviet passenger ships on the way to Cuba; did they arrive and have they left and, if so, did they carry Soviet troops on board?

I think it is much too early to say anything regarding the movement of Soviet military personnel out of Cuba. The President has stated that the Soviet Government has indicated that within the next few weeks by the middle of March, approximately, they anticipate removing from the island of Cuba several thousand military personnel but it is much too early to report in any way upon those movements.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, could you tell us whether you are willing any of the major revisions that observers have suggested for the

military pay bill such as an earlier starting date?

SECRETARY McNAMARA: The question is are we prepared to accept any of the major revisions proposed by Congressman Rivers in the military pay bill?

I received a copy of his statement only yesterday morning. I have been studying it since that time. I have not nearly completed my review of it. It contains a series of suggested changes, all of them important, all of them deserving careful analysis. There does appear to be included among the changes a series of changes that would act to reduce the increases proposed in officer pay. I may be misinterpreting them. But this appears to me to be the effect. If that is the effect, I believe it to be unwise to reduce the officer pay increases below the levels which we propose and I would therefore plan to discuss that matter with the committee if I am interpreting it properly. But since I have only had this for a few hours I don't think I should comment more extensively on the subject.

QUESTION: On another subject, there has been some talk in the last few days about a possible missile gap, I mean a photo gap in the Cuban reconnaissance. Can you tell us if there was such a gap and if there was any reason why the CIA's job was taken over by the Air Force?

SECRETARY McNAMARA: Let me answer the last portion of the question first and then go to the first portion of the question.

Was there any reason for transferring operational responsibility for high level reconnaissance over Cuba from the CIA to the Air Force? The answer was yes there was such a reason. The number of flights increased to a point where the CIA aircraft were not capable of carrying them out and had to be supplemented therefore by SAC aircraft at which time the Strategic Air Command assumed responsibility for such operations.

Now as to the first portion of the question, was there a photo gap? I think not. I believe I mentioned, in fact I am certain I did, in the two-hour TV report approximately two weeks ago that between the 5th of September and the 14th of October, inclusive of those two dates, we flew and obtained photographs from six U-2 flights, one on the 5th of September, one on the 26th of September, one on the 29th of September, one on the 5th of October, one on the 7th of October and one on the 14th of October. I think you can see that the overflights were frequent during that period.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, can you tell us why it is that you have not released photographs from that period either publicly or to Members of Congress?

SECRETARY McNAMARA: Yes. The photographs didn't relate to the subject that I presented in my TV report. We were showing the progress during that particular series of months, July, August, September, October, and the photographs from this particular set of missions didn't relate to the specific sites that I was discussing.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, you have given what appears to be a mechanical reason for the Air Force taking over from the CIA. I wonder if there are any policy considerations?

SECRETARY McNAMARA: No.

QUESTION: And what you see as the role of the CIA and the Air Force in such operations?

SECRETARY McNAMARA: No, there were no policy considerations. There was simply a mechanical problem, as you imply, I gave a mechanical reason, and that was the basis for the decision. The Strategic Air Command had more aircraft by far available for this mission than the CIA and the number of flights required exceeded the capabilities of the CIA during that period.

QUESTION: Mr. Secretary, you were very optimistic in your foreword to your budget message about the progress of things in South Viet Nam. General Wheeler also was optimistic. Are you still optimistic or do you think it may take a little longer?

SECRETARY McNAMARA: I don't believe I have ever indicated it would be other than a long, hard struggle extending over a period of years. I have felt that way in the past after each of my meetings with our commanders in South Viet Nam and with the Ambassador in South Viet Nam. I have so reported after each of the visits I have held with those individuals both in Honolulu and in Saigon. I feel exactly the same way today. I am optimistic in the sense that progress is discernible. The drive of the Viet Cong supported by the North Vietnamese against the established government in South Viet Nam has been blunted.

There are a number of factors that are favorable, a number of indications that the South Vietnamese are stronger in relation to the Viet Cong than they were a year ago. In that sense there has been progress. For that reason I am optimistic. But I am not predicting the termination of the conflict. It will be a long, hard, dangerous conflict. The Viet Cong, despite these evidences of progress that I can cite have been able to recruit to their force sufficient personnel to offset very heavy losses.

I think this is an extremely important factor and one we must continue to watch. Furthermore, the Viet Cong continue to harass the established governmental authorities in South Viet Nam at the village level, at the Province level and at the national level. It is true that the incidents of attack by the Viet Cong against established forces and against the civilian